

# Die Bibel in der Kunst / Bible in the Arts

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## Book Review:

David J. Shepherd and Nicholas E. Johnson,  
Bertolt Brecht and the *David* Fragments (1919–1921).  
An Interdisciplinary Study.

(The Library of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies vol. 699)

London, New York: T&T Clark 2020

Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher



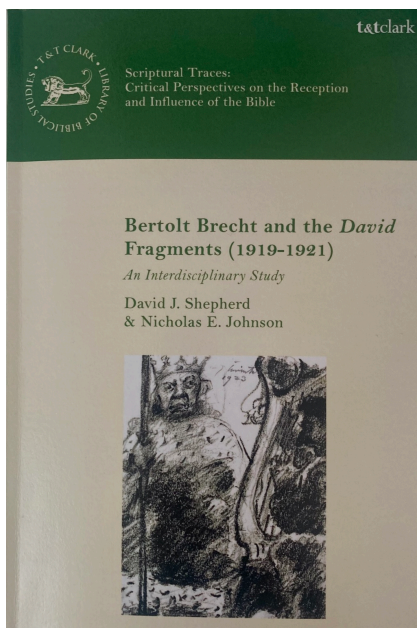
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David Shepherd and Nicholas Johnson present a detailed study of the fragments of Bertold Brecht's play "David", which have largely gone unnoticed by scholars. In their research, they examine and explore these texts in a threefold way:



- By providing the first translation of these fragments into English, this book makes the fragments available to a wider audience.
- The study meticulously examines the context of the texts, considering the biblical text, but also Brecht's early years as a poet, as well as other literary receptions of King David at the time. In this way, Brecht's interaction with the biblical narratives and the literary transformations of these narratives by other writers is explored.
- In their engagement with the text, the authors not only analyse and reflect on the fragments from a comparative literary and theological perspective, but also study the texts in practice. In theatrical workshops, further avenues of meaning were

explored using the method of "practice-as-research".

In the introduction, the authors give a brief overview of Brecht's relationship with the Bible, referring to his religious education and his interest in the Bible as a young adult, before turning to the fragments of the play "David". Starting with the fragments published in the *Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* (vol. 10), and working with Brecht's diary entries, they not only sketch a very dynamic phase of Brecht's literary work on this play in the period from 1919 to 1921, but also discover other fragments that are associated with "David" (BFA vol.

26). An outline of the scarce scholarly work on the David fragments is followed by a reflection on biblical texts and their afterlife, especially the afterlife of David in the life and literary work of the young Brecht. The special challenge posed by a fragmentary text and the possibility of bringing it to life through translation and performance is also considered.

In the following four chapters the authors succeed in bringing sophisticated exegetical interpretations of the biblical stories of David into a reflective dialogue with Brecht's version of David, taking into account his life and creative processes, the circumstances of the time, as well as contemporary literary works by other writers on the same theme.

The first chapter begins with a discussion of the challenges of translating for different contexts and explains how the final translation of the fragments of the play "David" offered in this chapter was developed. This is followed by a presentation of the translation of the German texts into English. A large number of footnotes provide helpful insights into difficult passages and a justification for the translation.

Chapters two and three focus on how Brecht developed and rewrote the minor characters of Uriah, Bathsheba, Absalom and Jesse (chapter 2) and the major characters of Jonathan, Saul and David (chapter 3). In describing and analysing these characters, the study pays close attention to the biblical texts and their portraits of the characters. In an informative and reflective way, exegetical studies of biblical characters are brought into dialogue with Brecht's characters, both on the level of method and on the level of interpretation. Insights into Brecht's life and the literary process of working on the play "David" and other projects are added where available. In this way "the dissonances and resonances between Brecht's voice in the fragments and both the biblical tradition and Brecht's own experience as it is reflected in his own writings and those of his circle" (p. 124) are emphasised.

The next chapter broadens the scope of the study by examining how Brecht's treatment of biblical texts and motifs fits into the tradition of literary reception of the Saul/David stories, which were quite popular between 1890 and 1920. The works of three authors are explored in greater detail: Lion Feuchtwanger's "König Saul", André Gide's "Saul" and Otto Zarek's "David". Each of these plays is presented in its own contexts, and the (dis)similarities between them and Brecht's transformation of the biblical texts are considered.

Chapter 5 presents a different approach to the David fragments, as it turns its attention to the aspect of performance. The David fragments were performed only once in the 20th century, at the Hebbel Theatre in Berlin in 1995. While this staging used the Bible to fill in the gaps between the fragments, the present study is looking for a different approach. It does not seek to complete the David fragments, but to work with them in a collaborative investigation in theatrical workshops. In doing so, the "practice-as-research" is used as "a key methodology for understanding

the world of the fragments, both in terms of their origin (i.e. as written by Brecht) and their contemporary resonance (i.e. their function in performance)” (p. 170). Thus, in this approach the performance techniques and practice are used as a means of research (p. 172). After explaining this approach, the authors describe the course of the project and the workshops with the ensemble. It becomes clear how the different phases are interwoven: Translation, textual analysis and production in the ensemble workshops are intertwined and mutually enriching. The results of this intensive engagement with the David fragments were presented in a full-scale theatre production and in academic lectures and publications.

The final reflections focus on the question of what insights the project has gained regarding Brecht’s David fragments, regarding the afterlife of biblical characters, and regarding the methods used.

In conclusion, it can be said that this study is an asset for scholars from different disciplines – be it biblical, literary, or theatre studies. The authors are careful to present their research in such a way that scholars from different disciplines can follow the argument and share the insights. The in-depth analysis of the David fragments, the careful examination of a wide range of contexts, as well as the reflections on the challenges of exploring the afterlife of biblical characters and the ‘practice-as-research’ approach offer both a multifaceted insight into Brecht’s play and an innovative approach to the afterlife of biblical texts in literature.

## Impressum

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